

## REVIEW: *THE EMPEROR FAR AWAY: TRAVELS AT THE EDGE OF CHINA*

Reviewed by Jonathan Z. Ludwig (Rice University)



David Eimer. 2014. *The Emperor Far Away: Travels at the Edge of China*. New York: Bloomsbury. xiii + 336. Maps, introduction, further reading, acknowledgments, index. ISBN: 978-1-62040-363-1 (hardcover, 28USD).

*The Emperor Far Away* is the travelogue of David Eimer, who formerly served as the Beijing correspondent for the *Sunday Telegraph* and as a writer for the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* during his years living in the People's Republic of China (2005-2012). During this time, Eimer traveled the length of the country's borders in an effort to understand the China away from the big eastern cities and coastal regions. In this volume, he sets out to explain these hinterlands to his readers, most of whom, he assumes, only know of China from reports about and from major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai.

With a border of over 22,000 kilometers (13,000 miles) that connects China to fourteen independent nations and two special administrative regions, Hong Kong and Macau. Travel along the largest number of border entities of any country in the world - China's periphery - and travel along it is a true opportunity to test the Chinese adage, from which the book gets its title, that sums up the government's fears concerning their borderlands: "The mountains are high and the emperor is far away." Lands far from the center resemble the center less and less and, in a tightly controlled state such as China, are harder to watch and to control. Eimer's travels vindicate both of these suppositions. In addition, they help to explain why the ruling, predominantly-Han Communist Party is so obsessed with populating these regions with increasingly large number of ethnic Han and finding ways to tighten their hold in these lands.

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After an introduction, the book is divided into four sections: 'Xinjiang-The New Frontier', 'Tibet-The Wild West', 'Yunnan-Trouble in Paradise', and 'Dongbei-Pushing the Boundaries'. While the first three are focused on the specific provinces mentioned in their titles, the final section encompasses the rest of his travels in the northeast of the country, including along the North Korean border, and from where he ultimately exits China and enters Russia.

Eimer's purpose in his travels is to visit with members of several of the fifty-five officially recognized minority ethnic groups in China, see how they live and relate to the Han Chinese, and then cross the border to examine ethnically similar peoples in contiguous regions. The two best known ethnic groups in the West are the Tibetans and the Uyghurs. The former are known because of the Dalai Lama and the fondness some in the West have for him and for Buddhism. The latter are known for being Muslim and, hence, "dangerous." This is used as tacit support of a Hanization policy and an increasingly brutal crackdown on the Uyghur population throughout the country. The issue with Tibet is trickier to handle from a public relations standpoint if such things were considered; however, in Tibet the same heavy-handed approach is used as in Xinjiang.

The point Eimer makes, almost in passing, is that in some ways, these are the two least dangerous of the four regions he visits. Both areas are geographically isolated, physically challenging places to live and work, sparsely populated, and are primarily home to only one ethnic minority that can be easily segregated and watched. On the other hand, Yunnan Province, which is held up as a location where "model" ethnicities live, is rife with smugglers, who bring drugs, child brides, and, potentially, weapons across the border, all of which would seem to pose a greater threat to the long-term stability of the Beijing government than disaffected Buddhist monks. This connection is one Eimer fails to make.

Likewise, the Koreans in Dongbei 'the Northeast', who, as Eimer discovers, have a higher standard of living than other ethnic minorities inside China. They are also possibly the only minority group doing better in China than their counterparts across the

border. Dongbei Koreans face the daily challenge of what may happen if the North Korean government falls and the starving population tries to storm across the border. While this is a fear that Beijing certainly has, this does not come across in the book, and Beijing is less heavy-handed here, feeling that they have adequately assimilated the local populace into greater China.

Entering Russia from the northeast, another border region far from the center of its ruling country, demonstrates the veracity of a Russian adage, similar to the aforementioned Chinese saying: "God is in his heaven, and the Tsar is far away." This is a region that closely resembles the Chinese borderlands Eimer has left behind. It is outside the strong and direct control of its center and it does not demographically resemble its center - the European Russia of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Instead, it is more Asiatic than Russian, and it is subject to the growing influence of those on the other side of the border. In this case it is the Chinese, who once arguably owned these lands and increasingly want them back, who are exerting this cultural and economic impact. Eimer thus ends his journey in a part of the world that the Chinese are subjecting to the very pressures that they fear in their own periphery. This could be the topic of another, perhaps more academically rigorous book.

In the end, although an interesting read, the book suffers from a lack of focus and solid conclusions, particularly when considered from an academic point of view. For example, nowhere does Eimer make a clear connection between the treatment of many non-Han Chinese citizens, their feelings toward Beijing, and economic empowerment. For example, the Dai in Yunnan Province and the Koreans in Dongbei are economically empowered; hence, they are less resentful and do not need to be "controlled" by a heavy hand. Other ethnic groups seem to be kept out of the growing Chinese economy. The example of two Uyghur engineers working as barbers because the Chinese-run companies will not hire non-Han is only one example in one part of the country. Likewise, Eimer does not make the connection between the near-extinction of Manchu as a language - only about one hundred people still speak the language inside of China - and their complete assimilation by the Han as the ultimate

goal that Beijing has for all its ethnic groups. This is a fear that many ethnic minorities also have, particularly in Tibet.

Instead, Eimer makes reference to his 1988 trip to the outskirts of China, but this book is not a retracing of that trip. It also is not a comparative study of the two trips beyond a few observations along the way. Such a comparison would have made for an interesting academic study and, as a reporter, he could have gathered resources to complete it. Rather, the book contains smatterings of history tossed together with presentations of current life and a number of travel stories from which he makes generalizations on life in the various regions through which he travels. While some of his generalizations are on target, they are presented as conclusions based on anecdotal evidence and conversations with a very limited number of people. Eimer himself also plays too big of a role in two events. While he could make a case for discussing his use of *yaba* in Wa State, there seems to be no reason to discuss having sex with a Chinese woman during his time in Kashgar. This story, at least, should have been subject to self-editing if not that of the professional kind.

Readers with a casual interest in modern China, or those who want a basic familiarization with the borderlands of China might find this book a place to satisfy their curiosity, but budding scholars or those who wish a more in-depth analysis should look beyond this tome.